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SUBJECT: D'ALEMA, LEBANON, AND ENGAGING ITALY

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald P. Spogli, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Foreign Minister Massimo D'Alema is emblematic of both the possibilities and challenges posed by Italy's center-left government. Prickly. Ex-Communist. Europeanist. Critic of Iraq war. Critic of alleged US unilateralism. Political opponent of former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Political exponent of "equal closeness" to Arabs and Israelis (often translated as pro-Arab). President of Democrats of Left (DS) party. Member of Parliament since 1987. Prime Minister 1998-2000. Foreign Minister. Possible future PM, possible future President. Pragmatic. Sometimes overconfident. Coalition disciplinarian. Someone Berlusconi says he can deal with. Risk-taker. Not afraid to engage. Willing to be team player. Not afraid to use force. Backed Balkans bombing when PM. Driving force on current Lebanon mission. Political strongman in Italy's ruling center-left coalition.

¶2. (C) This government came to power trumpeting that it would not be a US lackey, the way Berlusconi supposedly was. To be sure, we heard privately that equal value would be put on Transatlantic and European relations; it was even in the platform. But there were nevertheless concerns that the new Italian lineup would have a Gaullist tinge. The foreign policy road would pass through Brussels, not Washington. And this general campaign tone carried on for a few months after the election.

¶3. (C) But then, given a chance to work with us on Lebanon, pragmatism took over from rhetoric. They concluded they could help themselves, the EU, and us by coordinating both with us and in the EU context. In fact, Lebanon showed that this government had deliberately not opted on a policy self-consciously independent of Washington. Quite the contrary. They decided that the connections were good, and they advertised it.

¶4. (U) D'Alema told interviewers that a Sicilian fisherman overheard him say "bye-bye Condi" (when he was concluding a call on his yacht 'Ikarus'), and exclaimed, "Your Honor, you weren't really talking with Rice? I don't believe it!" A columnist in the right-wing daily Il Giornale, noting reports that D'Alema had had some difficulty maneuvering his yacht that day, gibed: "Shouldn't someone who says 'bye-bye Condi' and charms the fishermen of Marettimo perhaps be more careful to keep his 'Ikarus' from banging into the pier? But he was too busy at the helm of the world to mind that of his own boat..."

¶5. (C) Perhaps the alignment of interests on Lebanon could be dismissed as just dumb luck. But even before Lebanon, D'Alema had responded to a request by the Secretary on Iraq, in their initial Washington meeting, deciding to reverse

position and maintain a civilian presence in Iraq. And no doubt, Italy surprised itself by the way it stepped up to the plate on Lebanon. But, at bottom, the US made it possible. We asked them to host the Rome Conference. Our leadership engaged theirs at critical moments on the follow up. And it was only after that this government chose to see US support as the essential lever for joint action with EU partners.

¶16. (C) But to keep this in a positive groove will require careful tending. D'Alema will be key. We may quite often be in alignment with the Italians on ends, but just as often we may differ on the means. This is because the instinct of D'Alema, and Prodi, as with their own domestic coalition, is to be inclusive. They will be inclined to reach out faster and further to Syria and Iran, to involve them, to try to give them a stake in success. They will focus more on carrots than sticks. The alignment on Lebanon is in many ways favorable, but we cannot yet call it typical. The GOI is going to want a bigger role on Iran issues in the future, and we should expect differences of approach to come into play there, too.

¶17. (C) Even so, the Lebanon case suggests it is well worth the effort to keep the Italian leadership effectively engaged. It also makes sense to do so well before Italy takes up its UN Security Council seat in January. The center-left government wants Italy to matter, and D'Alema/Prodi believe that Europe only matters when it is united. They have shown they are willing to put in a tenacious effort to achieve European cohesion, especially when they sense US support. They want Europe to be an effective team, but they also appear to want Europe and the United States to be an effective team.

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